

God's Power and the Impossible: Who Delineates Them?

EMMANUEL DURAND, O.P.

*University of Fribourg
Fribourg, Switzerland*

From Epicurus to Hume, and from Hume to Hans Jonas, the notion of omnipotence has been periodically called into question, if not dismissed. Contestation or circumvention is found in both theology and philosophy.

From a theological perspective, it might sound convenient to distinguish between God's almightiness, confessed in the Creed, and God's omnipotence, articulated by philosophers. The Almighty would disclose the ultimate meaning of his power in the Paschal mystery, whereas omnipotence is subjected to a great variety of definitions. The latter should be abandoned to the arena of philosophers and the stalemated arguments undertaken by logicians.¹ Moreover, as Origen suggested, almightiness proves to be Trinitarian,² whereas omnipotence is metaphysical. Excellent contemporary theologians orient, intentionally or not, the theology of God's almightiness and sovereignty in this direction.³ Within Catholic Tradition, though, true omnipotence should be thought of in a way which can be integrated in the

¹ See Peter T. Geach, "Omnipotence," *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 7–20. For a sharp divide between almightiness and omnipotence, see already Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d. 42, q. unica. For their comments on an earlier draft of this essay, I warmly thank Michał Paluch, O.P., and Thomas Joseph White, O.P.

² See Origen, *Peri archôn* 1.2.10.

³ See, among the very best ones: Jean-Pierre Batut, *Pantocrator: "Dieu le Père tout-puissant" dans la théologie prénicéenne* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2009); Marc Vial, *Pour une théologie de la toute-puissance de Dieu: L'approche d'Eberhard Jüngel* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016); Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23–65.

confession of the Almighty. At the same time, the concept of almightiness should not depart from a wisely defined omnipotence.

From a philosophical perspective, one might observe—at least in the continental context—a transfer from omnipotence to what might be called the “omni-possible.” From this perspective, the unmastered possibilities of God cannot be submitted to any human concept of power. We literally cannot conceive what God is capable of. God is the only master of the impossible. No conceptually delimited power can hem in the open field of possibilities. Moreover, human reason has neither ground nor right to frame or limit the kind of impossibilities God might be *willing* to overcome.⁴ Otherwise, God would be constrained by some idolatrous concept of ours. The impossible should in no way limit God, who surpasses our knowledge of limited capacities. Should we engage in this line of postmodern thinking about the unbound God?

In this essay, I will attempt to bring omnipotence and almightiness together. Searching for integration and unity in this field relies on the assumption that reason and faith aim at the very same truth who is God and his wisdom, embodied in both the created order and in the Paschal mystery. Instead of fostering a sharp divide of registers or notional contents between almightiness and omnipotence, I will argue that the very same attribute of the One True God might be approached by both philosophers and theologians, relying on their proper and different instances of judgment. The key to this epistemological argument will be provided by Thomas Aquinas’s analysis of the possible and the impossible, within a theology which remains mindful of God’s power.

There are four common, often-overlapping objections to God’s omnipotence. First, omnipotence is arbitrary. If God is omnipotent, his power is infinite, and nothing is compelling within the created order. Anything is possible and the opposite as well, so that a given sequence of events can be replaced at any time by another possible sequence of alternative events. Everything therefore seems to be on hold, without intrinsic value or reliability. The regularity of phenomena, physical laws, ethical norms, and human responsibility are all pending, in the end determined by divine volition.

Second, omnipotence is overwhelming, if not self-contradictory. If God is omnipotent, his power is infinite and leaves no room for other powers.

⁴ See Jean-Luc Marion, “L’impossibilité de l’impossible: Dieu,” *Archivio di filosofia* 78 (2010): 21–36. Marion does not make any distinction between impossible to nature and impossible *per se*, merging both in the impossible “for us.”

Nothing can stand against God. Ultimately, nothing should exist outside of him, since he saturates the whole range of possibilities with his power alone. The idea that God would be, at once, omnipotent and Creator would seem to involve a contradiction, insofar as creation implies a real otherness and a proper space of existence.⁵

Third, an omnipotent God would be guilty. If God is truly omnipotent, he is guilty of the woes and evils he tolerates in this world, at least as soon as they exceed the proportion of what his creatures could bear. An omnipotent God ought to curb evils and hold back plagues, while obviously he does not do so and lets human beings face them to the best of their ability. Most of the time, however, they are submerged and dehumanized.⁶

Fourth, the idea that God is powerful might well be a pitiful fantasy and a poor projection, set up by males who themselves dream of being all powerful themselves. While we are often powerless, especially while facing our limitations, woes and evils, we dream of being all powerful. However, perversion consists precisely in refusing limitations and want. God then comes into the picture as the maximized projection of archaic representations of power: male, paternal, creative, sovereign, limitless.⁷

Framing Historically the Issue of Unbound Power

In this essay, I would like to address the first objection in particular. I will do so by weaving together statements from the Gospels and metaphysical arguments. However, first I would like to refine the fabric of the objection at hand, giving it more precision.

If God's power is understood in such a way that it has no objective limitation because of its infinity, everything could be, or could become, very different. Realities, events, chains, cycles, orders, laws, norms, values—all this is suspended. As long as God wills them to be as they are, they remain. Yet, God could also will another kind of physical world, a different ethical order, or for that matter, a human history quite unlike our

⁵ See Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice," *The Journal of Religion* 67 (1987): 1–13.

⁶ See David Hume, *Dialogue concerning Natural Religion*, bk. 10, in *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings* (1779), ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 97–92.

⁷ See: Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York, 1984), 6–26; Jean Ansaldi, "La toute-puissance du Dieu du théisme dans le champ de la perversion," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 47 (1991): 3–11; André Wénin, "Au-delà des représentations, Dieu," in *Dieu à l'épreuve de notre cri*, ed. Adolphe Gesché and Paul Scolas (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 25–44.

own. At any moment, another sequence of events, causes and effects, could replace the usual world that we experience. As a consequence, regularity of phenomena, physical laws, ethical norms, and human responsibility rest on borrowed time." This kind of omnipotence shares a great deal with the infamous *potentia absoluta* of late Scholasticism, the unbound power of God.

Until the late Scholastic period, the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*, unbound power and ordained power, was considered a purely rational experiment. Wisely, Aquinas states that the order inscribed by God in creation never equals the fullness of his wisdom and justice, identical to his very essence in divine simplicity. However ordered the works of God may be, the divine goodness always exceeds the proportion of the created order. This leaves room *theoretically* for other possible orders in the course of things, apart from contradictions.⁸ For Aquinas, the distinction between unbound power and ordered power is merely a distinction of reason, not a real one. Ordered power is the only one actually implemented by God according to his benevolent designs. As a rational experiment, though, one might abstract power from other divine attributes. In that case, unbound power extends to everything that ultimately coheres with the notion of being (*ratio entis*), thus excluding only that which is contradictory.

However, Duns Scotus turned the thought experiment into a real distinction.⁹ For him, the unbound power of God might, at any time, breach through and make an exception in the usual implementation of his ordinary power, as well as all mediation by secondary causes. This huge difference between Scotus and Aquinas in regard to the divine power stems from a significant epistemological divide which separates the two thinkers. Whereas Aquinas holds convergence between faith and reason in respect to the very same objects, Scotus states that faith and reason

⁸ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 25, a. 5; *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 5.

⁹ See: Eugenio Randi, "Potentia Dei conditionata: Una questione di Hugo di Saint-Cher sull'onnipotenza divina" (*Sent.* I, 42, q. 1), *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 39 (1984): 521–36; Randi, "A Scotist Way of Distinguishing between God's Absolute and Ordained Power," *Studies in Church History Subsidia* 5 (1987): 43–50; William J. Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition: A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power* (Bergamo: P. Lubrina, 1990); Courtenay, "The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages," in *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy: Islamic, Jewish and Christian Perspectives*, ed. Tamar Rudavsky (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), 243–69.

cannot reach at the same objects. This deficiency applies to the case of the divine power.¹⁰

For Scotus, divine omnipotence cannot be demonstrated by reason, for it is an object of faith, attested by the first article of the Creed. Rational demonstrations do not deal with omnipotence as a divine attribute, but rather with infinite power. This kind of power has been known of by philosophers, such as Aristotle, Avicenna, and Averroes. They reached at the First Cause that moves all things through secondary causes. Infinite power might be rigorously inferred from the secondary causes that metaphysically depend on the First Cause. As revealed to faith, the divine omnipotence differs essentially from the infinite power of the First Cause, because it is not tied to secondary causes. God does not need anything to accomplish what he wants. He is not subjected to any order of secondary causes he pre-established. At will, God can bypass worldly causes, suspend them or modify their natural order. Divine omnipotence therefore is the same as the unbound freedom of God. God should not be limited by any of the laws he has established in creation. Within the overall context of Scotus's thought, this is connected to the assumption that every free agent might, at the very moment it does something specific, do the opposite. Such freedom ultimately is that of God's unbound power, considered here as a kind of alternative manner of operating.

With a slightly different terminology, we have returned to our initial problem. As an object of faith, God's almightiness is drawn from God's mighty deeds in salvation history. It cannot be demonstrated or qualified by natural reason, whereas omnipotence—as infinite power—should be investigated by or abandoned to philosophers. With this challenge in mind, I would like to move back to the way Christ speaks of power, possibility, and impossibility in the Gospels. Taking into account these statements in a sound theology will require some metaphysical awareness.

God's Power in the New Testament

I am not going to solve any exegetical issue in this essay, but I would like to make clear that New Testament statements concerning God's power often call for basic metaphysical clarifications and decisions. When these options are not made explicit, they are nevertheless operating within interpretations, though beyond awareness. A very famous illustration has been provided by Rudolf Bultmann's theology of divine action and miracles.

¹⁰ Compare Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 25, a. 5, ad 1, and Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d. 42, q. unica. See *La puissance et son ombre: De Pierre Lombard et Luther*, ed. Olivier Boulnois (Paris: Aubier, 1994), 53–65 and 263–67.

His vision presupposed a clear discontinuity between the field of human affairs, open to God's action, and the field of nature, closed to such action.¹¹ This disjunction implies two metaphysical assumptions: (1) Nature is a closed and deterministic system; (2) Physical, non-contingent causation and God's action are incompatible. Therefore, God cannot act within nature, though he might be involved in the existential self-understanding of human subjects. Unfortunately for Bultmann, at least one of these metaphysical assumptions proves to be wrong. In both physics and metaphysics, causation is increasingly coming to be acknowledged as occurring in a contingent manner. The second assumption should be discussed as well, but it would take too long. Of course, Bultmann's metaphysical assumptions were not his main motives for proposing an existential theory of divine action, but this facet of his argument falls apart once it is made explicit. In a similar way, by the end of this essay, I would like to provide one key of discernment in respect to unbound readings of Luke 1:35: "Nothing is impossible to God."

God's power is testified or confessed in manifold ways in the New Testament. First, in the Pauline epistles, the overcoming of the usual mundane hierarchy of power and weakness is strongly stated by Paul, who speaks eloquently of the inversion of all worldly powers through the Cross. Unexpectedly, God's power has been demonstrated and exalted through the ultimate weakness of Christ. Whereas all human power seemed totally exhausted in the Crucified One, he was nevertheless fulfilling the ultimate goal of his mission. This paradoxical event spoke not only of Christ alone, but also, through him, of God's unique way of salvation (1 Cor 1:23–25). The same paradox is at work in Paul's preaching, which is entirely derived from the Cross, as well as in his governance of the turbulent community in Corinth (1 Cor 2:2–5; 2 Cor 12:9–10; 13:2–4, 9).

Second, in the Synoptic Gospels, God's power is said to be the unique capacity of his for specific actions, such as forgiving sins (Mark 2:7; Luke 5:21), raising up children for Abraham (Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8), destroying both soul and body (Matt 10:28; Luke 12:5), and healing the sick miraculously (Luke 5:17). Some of these divine actions can be performed through human actions, as the last one is throughout Jesus's ministry.

In contrast, the Gospel according to John does not qualify the power that God has of doing so and so. Instead, this Gospel underscores many

¹¹ See: Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans W. Bartsch (London: SCPK, 1953), 1–44; Ian G. Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures 1989–1991* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 254–56.

actions that human beings could never accomplish unless they were helped by God or Christ: perform signs, enter the kingdom, believe in Jesus, receive the Spirit, and indeed, do anything.¹² In this way, God's gracious power is also indicated through all kinds of incapacities of human beings regarding the supernatural realm.

Third, power (*dynamis*) is employed at times as a proper name or attribute of God. The Angel designates the Spirit as "the Power of the Most High" when announcing to Mary Jesus's conception (Luke 1:35). The Virgin praises God as "the Powerful" (*ho dynatos*) in the Magnificat (Luke 1:49). Jesus himself, arguing with the Sadducees about the resurrection of the dead, denounces their inability to know Scriptures as well as God's power (Mark 12:24; Matt 22:29). During his trial, Jesus responds to the high priest that the Son of Man will be seen sitting at the right hand of "the Power" (Mark 14:62; Matt 22:29). These designations are also numerous in the Book of Revelation, by means either of the attribute *dynamis* or of the title *pantocrator*.¹³

Just by paying attention to the semantic field of power in the New Testament, one can acquire some biblical sense of God's ordered power in the economy of salvation, revealing God's identity, his soteriological initiatives and aims, as well as his means: forgiving, healing, performing signs, provoking faith, empowering little ones, and so on.

Fourthly, another mode of attestation of God's power is found in the synoptic Gospels: statements about the possible and the impossible. These retain our attention and call for further scrutiny. The subject for whom something is said to be possible or impossible might be: (1) God, (2) Abba/Father, or (3) those who believe.

Following the Synoptic Gospels (here in Douai-Rheims version,¹⁴ emphases added), we can highlight four statements within dialogues and one prayer.

¹² See John 3:2–5; 5:44; 6:44, 65; 7:34–36; 8:21–22.43; 9:16; 12:39; 13:33, 36–37; 14:17; 15:5; 16:12.

¹³ *Pantocrator* and *pantocratoria* express in a definite manner the lordship or sovereignty of God and Christ over creation and history; see Rev. 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22.

¹⁴ In this section, I use this old English translation of a Latin version of the Bible because its Latin original remains very close to the texts Aquinas made use of. Most of the time, Aquinas did not read Luke 1:35 in the same way we usually do in modern translations of the Greek New Testament.

The Angel to Mary at the Annunciation	And behold thy cousin Elizabeth, she also hath conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her that is called barren. Because <i>no word shall be impossible with God</i> . (Luke 1:36–37)
To the father of a possessed boy	If thou canst believe, <i>all things are possible to him that believeth</i> . (Mark 9:23)
To the disciples unable to help the father	For, amen I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain: Remove from hence hither, and it shall remove: and <i>nothing shall be impossible to you</i> . (Matt 17:20)
Regarding how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God	[The disciples] wondered the more, saying among themselves: Who then can be saved? And Jesus looking on them, saith with men it is impossible; but not with God. For <i>all things are possible with God</i> . (Mark 10:26–27; Matt 19:25–26; Luke 18:27)
Jesus praying at Gethsemane	And when he was gone forward a little, he fell flat on the ground: and he prayed that, if it might be, the hour might pass from him. And he saith: Abba, Father, <i>all things are possible to thee</i> : remove this chalice from me; but not what I will, but what thou wilt. (Mark 14:35–36; Matt 26:39)

According to the Angel, God's word stands as some promise which goes beyond what human beings would consider possible. God's power overcomes the barrenness of the post-menopausal Elizabeth, accomplishing something that is impossible for nature, according to the normal limitations of human procreation.

In Jesus's own words, "everything is possible" or "nothing is impossible," not only to the power of God, but also to whoever believes. It is such a challenge for a father who experienced his son's possession (and/or epilepsy) from childhood to believe without restriction that Jesus might free the boy from this affliction. This exceeds the disciples' own ability to sufficiently have the boundless faith needed to intercede efficaciously and

drive out the spirit. Still, wholehearted faith would make everything possible when the disciples face insurmountable obstacles with God, relying entirely through faith on God's own might.¹⁵

Eventually, facing an extreme anguish for death at Gethsemane, Jesus himself expresses directly to God his own confidence in God's saving power. Crying out to God, Christ's words are, nonetheless, marked with a kind of ambivalence. "Everything is possible for you" is highly true, but in this specific setting, it entails an ultimate temptation for Jesus himself: "Take this cup from me." Jesus resists this temptation and opposes it with his final consent: "Yet not what I will, but what you will."

In this context, Jesus's statements are not theoretically detached. They might have a significant theoretical load to be unpacked. However, they are always vitally connected to ultimate challenges for human resources and confidence. As we consider the narrative setting of these statements, they are not to be dealt with as unrestricted theoretical propositions. Nevertheless, some metaphysical distinctions prove very useful for interpreting the Angel's and Jesus's words with care and seriousness. At the least, such distinctions avoid misreading the Gospel and, in this way, help to strengthen our faith.

Registers and Meanings of Power

Dealing with power in the *Scriptum* on Lombard's *Sentences*, Thomas Aquinas starts from the usual meaning of power in common language, most often drawn from the field of human action (ethical or political), then moves to the physical order, and from there, abstracts a metaphysical concept of power. This concept is then enhanced and fully developed for a theological use.¹⁶ I suggest that we follow a similar path.

In common language, one might distinguish three principal senses of power:

- Impact and influence in the political order;
- Force and intensity within the physical realm;
- Charisma or ability to subjugate others.

Charismatic power over others is a very human phenomenon, often abusive

¹⁵ A classical distinction between dogmatic faith and faith as a charism might be helpful here, in line with Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, lecture 5, nos. 10–11. Miracles could not be secured by theological faith; they often depend on a charism of faith, granted to a few believers for the edification of all.

¹⁶ See Aquinas, *In I sent.* I, d. 42, q. 1, a. 1, resp.

and male. God might make use of this occasionally in specific biblical narratives, but these ambiguous traits should not define God's power. Both political and physical power hardly befit God, as they imply some counterforces and resistances. The more extensive political influence becomes, the more independent counterpowers are needed. With greater intensity in a given physical force, an equally intense opposite force is needed in response. Envisaging God's power along these lines would be highly misleading. God would be one more intra-worldly power, albeit the highest. If this were so, God would essentially be involved in a power balance with other physical forces or political powers.

These essential limitations of the common concepts of power call for a metaphysical discernment. For the sake of theology, starting from the physical and the political experiences of power, we need to consider power in a much more refined way. We should abstract power from any specific field of action. Such a thought experiment is metaphysical in nature: we have to investigate how and why power is related to being as being, not to being as physical, being as political, being as male, and so on. To perform such an essential reduction of power to its metaphysical lineaments results in a demythologization process. This is much needed to avoid anthropomorphic projections and caricatures of God's power, which lead to rejection, disbelief, and atheism.

Finally, one should remember here that God's act of power as Creator has the gift of being (*esse*) as its terminus. Therefore, it is utterly distinct from every intra-worldly creature-to-creature or human-to-human power, and cannot be adequately mirrored by them, except metaphorically or analogically at great remove and dissimilitude. God's act of power gives being to things. Consequently, far from acting over against the autonomy or flourishing of the creature, it is the foundation of that autonomy and flourishing. This also entails that God is *usually* hidden in his power since his power enables things to "appear" in their own integrity as gift. This outlook not only provides a kind of demythologization but also enables us to purify intra-worldly idolatries concerning power structures which we might take as being absolute.¹⁷

Commenting on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 5, Thomas Aquinas explicates four meanings of power.¹⁸ Two of them are relevant for our investigation:

¹⁷ I thank my friend Thomas Joseph White for having suggested this avenue of thought.

¹⁸ See Aquinas, *In V metaphys.*, lect. 14 (ch. 5), ed. Marietti, no. 954–60. In Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, this first semantic approach will be eventually completed by the demonstration of the priority of act over potency, in *Metaphysics* 9.8.1049b4f.

- Active power: principle of moving or changing something or someone else as other. This is the power to act upon something else.
- Passive power: capacity of being moved or changed by something or someone else as other. This is the power of receiving something else.

Active and passive powers result from a simple analysis of action and passion. For instance, in order to learn a new language, someone uses his or her active power of studying with intensity and assiduity. But this would be beneficial and transformative only because the very same person possesses also the passive power of receiving new sounds, being taught, memorizing, and learning.

The second meaning of power—the passive one—is often forgotten in common language as well as in the day-to-day language of theology in pedagogical and more popular settings. This leads to tremendous misrepresentations of the relation between God's power and creatures. Before standing before God's power with any active power, creatures more radically face God with a passive power.¹⁹ This is not a power to resist passively, but a capacity for being moved, drawn, called, and so on. Availability to be moved or changed by God is far more radical in every creature than the power to resist or collaborate with God.

The Active Subject of Power and the Limits of Impossible Objects

We shall now envisage God's power through two complementary lenses:

- Considering the active subject, God, who exercises power;
- Focusing on the object to which God's power might apply.²⁰

Being pure act, God is active power with no mingling of passive power. God does not move from potency to act. He is not changed, for better or worse, according to a passive power. God's active power is pure and premier, perfect and complete. When attributed to God, the notion of power retains only the notion of being the essential principle for acting as God. The

¹⁹ This distinction was totally missing in Jonas, "Concept of God after Auschwitz," 9. For a Christian dialectical treatment of very similar *aporia*, see Augustine of Hippo, *De ordine* 2.17.46; Lactantius, *De ira Dei* 13.20–21 (recalling the argument of Epicurus); Serge-Thomas Bonino, "L'incompréhensible sagesse de Dieu dans l'*Expositio super Iob*," in *Études Thomasiennes* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2018), 593–624.

²⁰ See Aquinas, *In I sent.*, d. 42, q. 2, a. 2, resp.

common notion of power is pruned of any distant completion by an activity to be achieved.²¹ There is no real distinction between God's power and God's activity. The real distinction is found between the created effects of God's activity and the uncreated power of God. We should also notice that God's active power is not granted by anyone else and not received from another. God is his very power, as well as his very essence. Consequently, God's power is not limited by any mode of reception in some subject, as is the case for human power. God's power is infinite in this respect.²²

Still, there is some limitation of God's active power, which stems from its perfection. As a consequence of God being pure act, any defective power should be removed from our thinking of God. In this respect, God cannot sin, for instance, because sin is a defect of the will. In a similar way, God cannot lie, as a lie is a failure in telling the truth; God cannot be tired or forget, and so on.²³

The objects of God's power might be assessed as possible or impossible according to different frames, scales, or referents. The objective limitation to God's power is set by that which is *per se* impossible. Any concept that equates what is with what is not proposes this kind of radical impossibility. A square circle is impossible *per se*. A man with no soul is similarly self-contradictory. That some past event or some past action would have not occurred is impossible *per se*. The impossible *per se*, being self-contradictory, does not highlight a limitation of God's active power, but entails a simple negation of the very essence of the possible. God cannot do such impossible things—not because of some intrinsic limitation placed upon his power, but rather because of the absence of any possible object. We shall return to this point below.

We must take into account both the actual perfection of God's power and its objects (possible or impossible *per se*). This provides a safeguard against the representation of God's power as unlimited. Focusing only on the infinity of God's active power would lead to an excessive or delirious depiction of God's might, one that would ultimately do great damage to true Christian faith.

Who Delineates the Impossible?

In his disputed question *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 3, Thomas Aquinas spells out various senses of the possible and the impossible, with some reference to

²¹ See Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 1, resp.; *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] II, chs. 8–10.

²² See Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 2, resp.

²³ See Aquinas, *In I sent.* I, d. 42, q. 2, a. 2, resp. For a developed and articulated list of many things that the omnipotent God cannot do, see *SCG* II, ch. 25.

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 5.12. This analysis unpacks two main categories:

- Possible and impossible in respect to some potency, active or passive:
 - Impossible because of some defect of the active power
 - Example: for a man to fly like a bird
 - Impossible because of some impediment external to the power
 - Example: for a man to see through a wall
- Possible or impossible in respect to being, whatever the power might be
 - Impossible by itself (*per se*), because of some contradiction

Aquinas argues that that which is *per se* impossible, entailing some contradiction, cannot be the object of any action, whatever might be the power in question and whoever might be the agent. The irreducible difference between affirmation and negation is used as the most obvious case depicting at once all contradictions of terms. The assumption is that the principle of non-contradiction between affirmation and negation (regarding the same formal object) is the very first principle of all human discourse and reasoning, without which no rational speech would stand. Further, more particular contradictions can be referred to the paramount one: the mutual exclusion between being and nonbeing.²⁴ In this way, Aquinas proceeds to a kind of reduction of every contradiction to that which is *per se* impossible.

The two categories of impossibility, spelled out above, can be labeled as (1) that which is impossible to nature—which is twofold, namely, by defect or by hindrance—and (2) that which is *per se* impossible. Relying on this clarification, Aquinas draws proper theological statements, first regarding that which is *per se* impossible:

Those things, then, which are impossible to nature in the first or second way are possible to God: because, since his power is infinite,

²⁴ See Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 3, resp. (referring to Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.3.1005b18). We follow the translation made by the English Dominican Fathers (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1952 [originally 1932]). Some support the view that Aquinas's understanding of the possible is eventually disconnected from any potency; see Kristell Trego, *L'impuissance du possible: Émergence et développement du possible, d'Aristote à l'aube des temps modernes* (Paris: Vrin, 2019), 231–37.

it is subject to no defect, nor is there any matter that he cannot transform at will, since his power is irresistible. On the other hand those things which involve the third kind of impossibility God cannot do, since he is supreme act and sovereign being: wherefore his action cannot terminate otherwise than principally in being, and secondarily in nonbeing. Consequently he cannot make yes and no to be true at the same time, nor any of those things which involve such an impossibility. Nor is he said to be unable to do these things through lack of power, but through lack of possibility, such things being intrinsically impossible: and this is what is meant by those who say that 'God can do it, but it cannot be done.'²⁵

For Aquinas, "all things are possible to God" does not apply to that which is *per se* impossible, which never meets the sound notion of possibility. May we focus on that which is impossible to nature? Should what remains impossible to a specific nature become possible to God? Does this mean that God would then act against the very nature that he has created and set in some definite order? To overcome these *aporia*, one must acknowledge that every creature has a radical passive power to be moved by God, even beyond all its natural active and passive powers. This radical passive power is labeled "obediential" potency.

Aquinas argues for this deeper level of consideration while responding to an objection drawn from a gloss to Romans 9:24: "If thou were cut out of the wild olive tree, which is natural to thee; and, contrary to nature, were grafted into the good olive tree" (Douai-Rheims). The gloss soundly states that "since God is the author of nature he cannot do what is contrary to nature." Shall we equate what is impossible to nature and what is contrary to nature? Should we conclude that God cannot do what is impossible to nature? Aquinas gets out of this trap by articulating a key distinction:

Augustine's words quoted in the gloss mean, not that God is unable to do otherwise than nature does, since his works are often contrary to the wonted course of nature [*contra consuetum cursum naturae*]; but that whatever he does in things is not contrary to nature, but is nature in them, forasmuch as he is the author and governor of nature [*conditor et ordinator naturae*]. Thus in the physical order we observe that when an inferior body is moved by a higher, the movement is natural to it, although it may not seem in keeping with the movement which it has by reason of its own nature: thus the tidal

²⁵ Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 3, resp.

movement of the sea is caused by the moon; and this movement is natural to it as the Commentator observes [*De coelo et mundo* 3, comm. 20], although water of itself has naturally a downward movement. Thus in all creatures, what God does in them is quasi-natural to them [*omnes creaturae quasi pro naturali habent quod a Deo in eis fit*]. Wherefore we distinguish in them a twofold potentiality: a natural potentiality in respect of their proper operations and movements, and another, which we call obediential, in respect of what is done in them by God.²⁶

The example of the tide is easy to grasp. As an effect of gravity, the natural power of water is to flow downward. Nevertheless, as an effect on the moon, the sea periodically moves up and down, contrary to the natural power of water. Such a move of flux and reflux is not really against nature, though, as the moon is a higher (celestial) cause by which water by its very nature can be moved. The availability of the sea to be moved by the moon is analogous to the obediential potency of every creature to be moved by God, beyond its natural power.

Today, one might object to this specific example that both the earth and the moon belong to the same order of causality and both influence the sea thanks to the same law of attraction by gravity. A simpler example could be the skills of a dog. A good one might sniff truffles. This belongs to his natural power. Once the same dog is properly trained by a police dog handler, it might sniff drugs and help identifying criminals. This results from a higher cause, the training by an officer, but the dog has the obediential potency to be elevated to this kind of skills. We could choose another example, like some healing process. An epileptic boy might be healed by the natural virtue of his own body and soul, by the right medication appointed by a good physician, and by the attentive care and affection of his parents and close friends. These are proximate causes of a restored good health. At least in the ancient world, the very same disease might be connected with higher causes or disturbances (like the bad spirit of Mark 9:14–29). In any case, higher causes might be involved in the healing of the boy, like petitionary prayers and, ultimately, God's very action. These kinds of causes belong to a different order than proximate causes and would operate without competing with the latter. The boy has the natural power of healing himself thanks to the help of proximate causes, but he also has some obediential potency to be healed—God willing—thanks to petitionary prayers, in conjunction with God's saving power.

²⁶ Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 1; see Aquinas, *Super Rom* 9, lec. 24 (no. 910).

Consequently, if we take into account the higher causes, that which is impossible for a specific natural active or passive power is not entirely impossible, for two main reasons:

- first, the active power of God is infinite on the side of God;
- second, every creature stands in obediential potency toward God.

Just by being created, every creature is fully available to God's power; and this is more deeply rooted in this being's creaturely condition than are any of its particular active or passive powers.

May we leave aside that which is *per se* impossible, which is excluded from the very notion of possibility? Who should state what is possible and what is impossible for some power? How can one distinguish what is possible and impossible for a nature? What sort of frame of reference should guide such discernment? I suspect that the Cartesian dormant in many of us would immediately respond: God is the only One to judge the possible and the impossible, as he is the master of the impossible.²⁷ Aquinas's response to these questions proves astonishing, though in the end, it presents a case of his characteristic way of integrating common-sense reason into Christian theology.

Thomas proposes a double consideration: on the side of those who judge and on the side of what is judged. Dealing with the former, Aquinas summons philosophy and theology as two different wisdoms:

Wisdom is twofold: mundane wisdom called philosophy, which considers the lower causes, causes namely that are themselves caused, and bases its judgements on them; and divine wisdom or theology, which considers the higher, that is the divine, causes and judges according to them. Now the higher causes are the divine attributes, such as the wisdom, goodness, will of God, and the like.²⁸

The example of some disease, provided by Aquinas, is relevant. An illness should be diagnosed according to its proximate causes. This falls to the skills of the physician. Nevertheless, the very same illness might also be assessed by taking into account remote causes, like a disturbing astral conjunction for instance. Discerning such an astral pattern pertains to

²⁷ See Jean-Luc Marion, "L'impossibilité de l'impossible: Dieu," 21–36. Regarding the background of this line of thought, see *La puissance et son ombre*, ed. Olivier Boulnois, 40–45, including key references to Ockham, Montaigne, and Descartes.

²⁸ Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 4, resp.

the skills of the astronomer. In this way, insomnia might be referred to a digestive trouble by the physician and to a full moon by the astronomer. Philosophy and theology relate to one another in a similar way as medicine and astronomy.

Philosophy and theology have their specific frames of reference and scopes. For effects that might stem from both inferior causes and superior causes, both wisdoms can work to discern what is possible and what is impossible according to their specific lenses of investigation. However, effects that could proceed only from superior causes are out of reach for the judgment of philosophy.

Let us now consider what is to be judged. The possible and the impossible should be assessed, first of all, in relation to the proximate causes of phenomena, and not in relation to superior and remote causes thereof. Such an analysis is required as a priority, because effects must be labeled as being possible or impossible in relation of their proximate causes. Otherwise, there would be no common meaning and no basic agreement concerning what is possible and what is impossible. In the same way, Aquinas remarks elsewhere that to discern necessity and contingency in this world should be done by reference to proximate causes.²⁹

An initial assessment of the possible and the impossible pertains to philosophy, properly speaking. It requires an etiological investigation of proximate causes, as it is done through a medical diagnosis. In the case of theology, however, two kinds of judgment might be registered concerning these matters.

First of all, theology discloses the involvement of superior causes in the very effectuation of inferior causalities. What is possible for nature does not merely come forth from proximate causes alone. It depends also on higher causes and, first and foremost, on the only and ultimate First Cause, who is God as Creator of all creatures and governor of all created effects or activities.³⁰ Secondly, theology might explain how natural limits (in relation to proximate causes) are exceeded, by pointing to the active power of God *and* at the obediential potency of all creatures in relation to God.

²⁹ See Aquinas, *SCG* III, ch. 72 (no. 2); *ST* I, q. 25, a. 3, ad 4; Guy Jalbert, *Nécessité et contingence chez Saint Thomas et chez ses prédécesseurs* (Ottawa: University Press, 1962), 133–64.

³⁰ Theology also highlights how secondary causalities interplay in such a way that God's will might be implemented, notwithstanding the usual course of nature or the predictable outcome of events; see Aquinas, *SCG* III, ch. 96 (no. 8); *ST* II-II, q. 83, a. 2, resp.; see also Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate Dei* 10.12.

Relying on these qualifications of philosophy and theology, Thomas can make a sound argument:

All things are possible to God. Therefore, if we must judge of a thing's possibility or impossibility in reference to him, nothing will be impossible: and this is not fitting [*inconueniens*].

The theologian would say that whatever is not impossible in itself is possible to God; according to Mark 9:22: *All things are possible to him that believeth*, and Luke 1:37: *No word shall be impossible with God*.³¹

The specific assessment provided by theology widens the scope of the possible, going beyond what is impossible to nature. Still, that which is *per se* impossible does not cohere with any notion of the possible, even theologically speaking. In order to decisively settle on a common and understandable language regarding the possible and the impossible, philosophy's own judgment is required. Judging according to God, theology goes far beyond the reach of philosophy, but the theologian cannot deal with the common and proper meanings of the terms "possible" and "impossible," even in Gospel statements, without philosophical judgment on realities involved according to proximate causes. We rightly should hope that, in many matters at hand, philosophical judgment is not so different from the shared discernment provided by common sense and practical sciences.

Eventually, Thomas dismisses three explanations of God's omnipotence which were common in his own time, explanations which focused on secondary aspects of this reality, thereby missing the very notion (*ratio*) of omnipotence:

- Focusing on the cause: God is omnipotent because he has an infinite power.
- Focusing on the perfection: God is omnipotent because he cannot endure any defect.
- Focusing on the mode of possession: God is omnipotent because he can do whatever he wills.

Accordingly, Aquinas states that the very *ratio* of omnipotence is to be found in the unique relation of God's power to everything that is truly possible:

³¹ Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 4, sc 4, and response to sc 4 (trans. slightly adjusted).

God's power, considered in itself, extends to all such objects as do not imply a contradiction. . . . As regards things that imply a contradiction, they are impossible to God as being impossible in themselves. Consequently God's power extends to things that are possible in themselves: and such are the things that do not involve a contradiction. Therefore it is evident that God is called almighty because he can do all things that are possible in themselves.³²

This sober and minimalist statement proves crucial for a sound theology. God should not be qualified or aimed at as the One who might overcome every impossibility without any restriction, since some of them are just non-sense, insofar as they entail contradiction. Leaving that which is *per se* impossible out of reach even for God's power does not mean that we, poor human beings, limit God by our own judgment or enclose him in some conceptual idol of our own. Aquinas's sound judgment on God's omnipotence relies on his fundamental confidence that there is some coherence or analogy between (1) God the Almighty, Creator of all that is, (2) the created order of (actual and potential) beings, and (3) the ability of the created human intellect to discern contradictions and to know God, thanks to his works and his Word.

Back to the Scriptures

Let us not turn back to the New Testament. Following Aquinas, the words "all things are possible" and "no word is impossible" presuppose the obediential potency which lies at the depths of every created being, still however, excluding that which is *per se* impossible. A sound theology should interpret these statements as meaning *even things impossible to nature are possible to God* and *no word is impossible, except those entailing contradiction*.

That which is impossible for nature is not only possible for God, but also for the one who believes. Why? Because the act of faith connects the believer directly to God's power. That which becomes possible to the one who believes depends radically on God's power, as when a delegate servant implements in a specific matter the power of a king.³³ This is fully articulated in Aquinas's theology of petitionary prayer, as one of the most powerful forms of human cooperation with the implementation of God's will, despite the frailty of petition in terms of worldly efficacy.³⁴

³² Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 7, resp.

³³ See Aquinas, *Super Matt* 17, lec. 20 (no. 1471).

³⁴ See Emmanuel Durand, "The Gospel of Prayer and Theories of Providence," *The Thomist* 78 (2014): 519–36.

Our reading of Aquinas has attempted to bring together Gospels' statements concerning the possible/impossible and a sound metaphysical discernment, which should respect some objective structure within a coherent network: (1) what is impossible to nature; (2) why God can go beyond it, as Creator; (3) though, without bypassing structural contradictions. We should avoid positing an undetermined sovereignty of God over every kind of impossibility, including contradictions, unless we wish to leap into irrationality rather than faith.

We might even go two steps further. Neither philosophers nor theologians should claim to specify what God could do or should do beyond the order of natural potencies.

Nevertheless, some metaphysicians might agree that God is wise, good, all-knowing, and omnipotent in such a way that these attributes are compatible and co-terminate in God's simplicity of essence. One should keep in mind, though, that in the *De potentia*, Aquinas attributes to theologians—not to philosophers—the ability to judge the possible and the impossible in accord with the divine attributes. Such a statement should be accompanied by the acknowledgment that human beings are not capable of mastering this compatibility by reason in every historical or existential context. Faced with overwhelming evils and woes, many do not see the compatibility of classical divine attributes. They prefer to dismiss omnipotence and/or to hold some post-metaphysical apophatism. I have still argued that God's ordered power, his *potentia ordinata*, is not a conceptual idol.

Theologians should go further, however, acknowledging that God's ordered power is entailed by Christ's preaching and deeds. Theological knowledge of God's action is not merely conjectural, but instead draws directly from revelation. In many and various ways, the Scriptures profess and interpret what God enacted or brought to completion above the mere order of nature. The Scriptures are not interested in framing all that God might have hypothetically done. Theology might proceed further thanks to the analogy of faith. The Scriptures are first of all fulfilled in Christ's preaching, actions, passions, death, and resurrection. However, they also might be accomplished in the life and ordeals, faith and hopes, self-surrender and holy death of humble believers, who cling to Christ and receive his Spirit, the very same One who inspired Scripture. In this way, Scripture supports our faith and confidence in the wisdom and power implemented by God through his providence, despite the obscurities of reason and the darkness of faith.